



BEACH VOLLEYBALL

Bello twins feeling bullish about making charge at Games

Coach Luis will ensure it's a family affair when his sons face some of the giants of the sport. **Kevin Garside** reports

Those *Love Island* lotharios should thank their lucky stars the Bello brothers are missing the narcissism gene.

As the name suggests, the Spanish-born twins would be formidable opposition, meeting the default standard for muscularity and poster-boy contours. In addition, they offer highly-developed intellects and genuine athletic talent.

I should point out that the *Love Island* reference is mine not theirs, a base mechanism for raising awareness of athletes who deserve a wider audience. Joaquin is a fifth-year medical student at Imperial College, Javier a graduate devoted to driving the brothers' beach volleyball odyssey. Neither has time for self-promotion via faux romance or confected drama. They are all in to fulfil a dream bequeathed by a family steeped in the sport.

Father Luis was a pro in Spain. His sons are bringing to bear the same genetic gifts but, from the age of 10 – when the family moved to London – in an English context, which has made for much pain

Javier and Joaquin Bello train on public courts in Barnes **STEVE SMITH**

and frustration. Despite the absence of a beach volleyball culture, the family found a way to indulge their enthusiasms and ultimately provide a pathway that allowed their sons to develop into world-class performers, claiming Commonwealth Youth gold along the way and finishing fifth in the Youth Olympics.

The Commonwealth Games is the most significant event of their short senior careers, an opportunity to introduce themselves to the nation. A photo of Luis crying in a group shot to celebrate Games qualification articulates the importance more than words. "Every step of the way he has cried. We make fun of him a little bit but he and my

mum get very stressed. They are very invested in us – not just as our parents, they are part of the team," Javier told **i**.

Indeed, for every pound delivered by funding bodies, the family has added two. The bank of mum and dad continues to be the primary source of funding, sending the boys to competitions across the globe. Luis teaches PE at the Lycée in London. He is not a rich man. To win a medal in Birmingham, in front of 4,000 in the arena and potentially millions more on TV and social media channels, could have a value beyond gold, silver or bronze for the exposure gained.

In a tournament that includes Australia, Canada and New Zealand, the challenge is stiff but realistic. "We feel we can cause an upset, and if there is one place we can do, it will be playing in Birmingham with a full stadium, with our fans and everyone there."

The boys train at a riverside complex in Barnes on courts formed of the same sand used at the London 2012 Olympics. In the absence of support from national coffers, it would be risible to offer the Bellos as a London legacy success. Nevertheless, the sand beneath their feet at least keeps the connection alive as they pursue the dream of Olympic qualification in Paris two years hence. To that end, Birmingham constitutes a significant staging post, a measure of progress.

The Australians are the alpha unit. "In Spanish we call them *toros* – bulls. They are built

strong. One of the most physical teams in the tournament," explains Joaquin. "When they serve, they only jump serve. They hit the ball hard every time. Like John Isner in tennis. When it goes in it is impossible to get back."

The assault on major honours is complicated by Joaquin's medical degree. "I tried to put him off at the start," Javier said. "I said, 'what are you doing man, winning the Olympics is more important than saving lives'. I didn't mean it, obviously. But it makes it harder for us because we can't put everything into it because of his studies."

To facilitate the push to qualify for Paris, Joaquin is planning to take a year off at the end of the present academic year, which began on 18 July. He has a fortnight's leave of absence for the Commonwealth Games to be recovered over Christmas when his fellow students are opening presents and eating turkey. "It is what it is," Joaquin says.

The second complication is coaching. Since they can't travel for training blocks during the academic year with other international squads, for example the Brazilians or Spanish, they require a full-time coach of their own. Hitherto the job has fallen to Luis, but that is no longer practicable or valuable. They have outgrown their father's expertise. A full-time coach would demand at least £30k plus

relocation costs, money they don't have. Any sponsors, or UK Sport exchequers, out there who feel their pain can reach out via their Facebook page.

As it is, the cost of hiring courts at £14 per hour falls to the family. That's a minimum of 12 hours – and up to 24 hours – per week at peak times. I'll do the math: £168 to £336 per week, or a second mortgage during high season. That level of

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investment intensifies the Commonwealth experience. It has to work for them. "When I close my eyes I see the stadium and I see myself walking out there. I visualised it. I don't normally have that with other competitions," Javier said. "I know the teams we are playing. I can see the whole thing.

We are excited to show people how good we are and what we can do. The reason we do this is to play at the big tournaments and stadiums. Hopefully this will showcase the sport and us."

Thus, for one week in August, does Smithfield find itself the centre of the beach volleyball universe, a 4,000-capacity arena laid to sand and party vibe. The Birmingham Bullring forms the backdrop, a sign perhaps that, at the age of 22, England's foremost Spaniards have arrived at the right place at the right time. The Bellos begin their campaign on Saturday against Tuvalu. Cyprus and New Zealand complete the group.



The brothers moved to England at the age of 10 **STEVE SMITH**